

# WORD CHOICE

Deliciously used *everyday* words  
Word smithery & word pictures  
Precision and growth with language

## WHAT DOES THE FOLLOWING THOUGHT MEAN?

“When promulgating your *esoteric* cogitations or articulating your superficial sentimentalities and amicable philosophical and psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your verbal evaporations have lucidity, intelligibility and veracious vivacity without rodomontade or thespian bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pompous propensity and sophomoric vacuity.”

-C.R., Syracuse, N.Y.

## DON'T USE BIG WORDS.

# WORD CHOICE

- ✓ **STRONG VOCABULARY**
- ✓ **NATURAL**
- ✓ **MAKING A CHOICE**
- ✓ **ENERGETIC VERBS**
- ✓ **SPECIFIC NOUNS**
- ✓ **EFFECTIVE WORDS  
AND PHRASES**
- ✓ **MINIMAL SLANG,  
CLICHES,  
REPETITION**

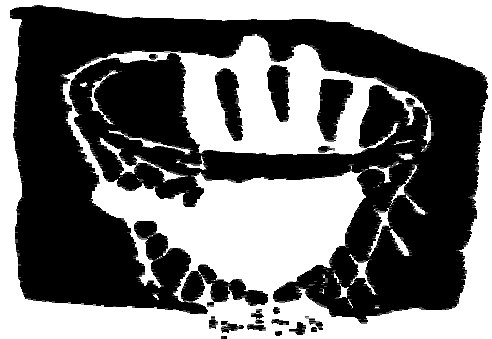
Word choice is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that moves and enlightens the reader.

# WORD CHOICE

- Lively verbs
- Original and deliberate choices
- Special moments
- Visual
- Specific and precise

## CAN YOU SEE IT?

- The black asphalt was crumbling off at the sides, and the paint on the court was chipping and wearing out, proof that there wasn't a day this court didn't go unused. The hoops were almost opposite. One was older, bent, the backboard slightly cracked, and leaning a hair to the right...



- ... the sound of you mother's coveted Ray Charles record, scratched and skipping, snaking into every room.
- It is a mild summer night and there is a deluge of rain that makes the strawberry red track glisten, as the lights surrounding the track gleam upon it.
- Then I leapt. I flew straightforward with my arms outstretched, my glove facing up. When I was at the pinnacle of my flight, the ball dropped into the palm of my glove and I dropped like a sack of potatoes on a wet lawn.
- An uninterrupted carpet of snow lay before us.

# WORD CHOICE

I do not choose the right word. I get rid of the wrong one  
-A.E. Houseman

As you read and listen to other people speak, you cultivate a rich vocabulary of precise and colorful words that let you say exactly what you want—not come close, but nail it right on the head. This is the essence of good word choice. Every new word increases your power.

“But there are so many words to learn; where do I begin?” you might ask. In his book, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser says, “Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum... flail, poke, dazzle, squash, beguile, pamper, swagger, wheedle, vex. Probably no other language has such a vast supply of verbs so bright with color.” Learn to develop a critical eye toward the verbs in your work. Are they active, powerful, full of energy and pizzazz?

Keep the vocabulary natural. Never write to impress or you’ll end up with sentences like this: “He cultivated his way into the kitchen,” or “Our friendship was highly lucrative.” See what happened? In an attempt to use words that were bigger, these writers forgot to make sure they made sense. A thesaurus can be a good friend to a writer, but only if used sparingly and with thought.

Your writing works best with specific words, carefully chosen to create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind. Play around with the words until they sound good. Don’t say, “The dog was big and mean.” Say, “A hundred pounds of snarling yellow fur launched itself from the porch, straining at a rope thin as spaghetti.” Now that’s something we can see happening!

The race in writing is not to the swift, but to the original.  
-William Zinsser

# TRAIT: WORD CHOICE

**RATING OF 5 (STRONG):** Words convey the intended message in an interesting, precise, and natural way. The writing is full and rich, yet concise.

- Words are specific and accurate; they seem just right.
- Imagery is strong.
- Powerful verbs give the writing energy.
- Striking words and phrases often catch the reader's eye, but the language is natural and never overdone.
- Expression is fresh and appealing; slang is used sparingly.

**RATING OF 3 (DEVELOPING):** The language is functional, even if it lacks punch; it does get the message across.

- Words are almost always correct and adequate (though not necessarily precise); it is easy to understand what the writer means.
- Familiar words and phrases communicate, but rarely capture the reader's imagination. The writer seems reluctant to stretch.
- The writer usually avoids experimenting; however, the paper may have one or two fine moments.
- Attempts at colorful language often come close to the mark, but may seem overdone or out of place.
- A few energetic verbs liven things up now and then; the reader yearns for more.
- The writer may lean a little on redundancy, or slip in a cliché-but never relies on these crutches to the point of annoyance.

**RATING OF 1 (BEGINNING):** The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words to convey meaning. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:

- Language is so vague and abstract (e.g., It was a fun time, it was nice and stuff) that only the most general message comes through.
- Persistent redundancy clouds the message and distracts the reader.
- Cliches or jargon serves as a crutch.
- Words are used incorrectly in more than one or two cases, sometimes making the message hard to decipher.
- The writer is not yet selecting words that would help the reader to have a better understanding.

# WORD CHOICE

**5** Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting and natural way. The words are powerful and engaging.

- Words are specific and accurate; it is easy to understand just what the writer means. The words and phrases create pictures in your mind.
- The language is natural and never overdone; both words and phrases are individual and effective.
- Lively verbs energize the writing. Precise nouns and modifiers add depth and specificity.
- Striking words and phrases often catch the reader's eye and linger in the reader's mind. (You can recall a handful as you reflect on the paper.)
- Precision is obvious. The writer has taken care to put just the right word or phrase in just the right spot...

**3** The language is functional, even if it lacks energy. It is easy to figure out the writer's meaning on a general level.

- Words are adequate and correct in a general sense; they simply lack flair and originality as they are used in the writing.
- Familiar words and phrases communicate, but rarely capture the reader's imagination. Still, the paper may have one or two fine moments.
- Attempts at colorful language come close to the mark, but sometimes seem overdone (thesaurus overload!).
- The words and phrases are functional-no more no less.

**1** The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words to convey meaning. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:

- Language is so vague (e.g., It was a fun time, She was neat, It was nice, we did lots of stuff) that only the most general message comes through.
- Persistent redundancy distracts the reader.
- Jargon or clichés distract or mislead.
- Words are used incorrectly, sometimes making the message hard to decipher.
- Problems with language leave the reader wondering what the writer is trying to say.

# WORD CHOICE

## 5 PAPER - EXTREMELY CLEAR, VISUAL, AND ACCURATE

I picked just the right words for just the right places.

- All the words in my paper fit. Each one seems just right.
- My words are colorful, snappy, vital, brisk and fresh. You won't find overdone, vague, or flowery language.
- Look at all my energetic verbs!
- Some of the words and phrases are so vivid that the reader won't be able to forget them.

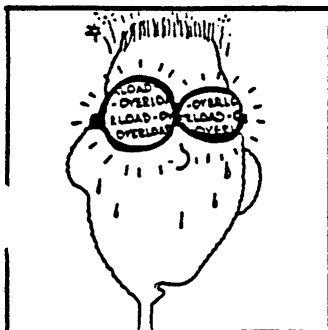
## 3 PAPER - CORRECT BUT NOT STRIKING

The words in my paper get the message across, but don't capture anyone's imagination or attention.

- I used everyday words pretty well, but I didn't stretch for a new or better way to say things.
- Most of the time the reader will figure out what I mean even if a few words are goofed up.
- Occasionally, I may have gone a bit overboard with words that tried to impress the reader.
- My words aren't real specific. Instead of saying, "The sun went down" I should have said, "The sun sagged into the treetops." Better, juicier details were needed!
- There are as many tried out clichés ("Bright and early," "Quick as a wink") as there are new, fresh and original phrases: "My mother made me feel more special than all her potted plants."

## 1 PAPER - CONFUSING, MISUSED WORDS, AND PHRASES ABOUND

My reader is often asking, "What did you mean by this?"



- A lot of my words and phrases are vague: "We liked to do things," "We were friends and stuff."
- My words don't make pictures yet. "Something neat happened." "It was awesome."
- Some of my words are misapplication-Oops, I mean misused.
- Over and over I used the same words, over and over, and the over and over again until my paper was over.

# WORD CHOICE

**5**

*I picked just the right words to express my ideas & feelings.*

*Every word seems exactly right.*

- *Colorful, fresh & snappy-yet nothing's overdone.*
- *Accurate & precise: that's me!*
- *Vivid, energetic verbs enliven every paragraph.*

**3**

*It might not tweak your imagination, but hey-it gets the message across.*

*It's functional, but it's not a stretch for me.*

- *O.K., so there's a cliché here and there.*
- *You'll find some originality, too!*
- *I might have over-utilized my thesaurus...*

**1**

*My reader is likely to ask, "Huh?"*

*I'm a victim of vague wording and fuzzy phrasing.*

- *It's hard to picture what I'm talking about.*
- *Maybe I misused a word or two...*
- *Some redundant phrases might be redundant.*



# WORD CHOICE

**-THE LANGUAGE THAT BRINGS IT TO LIFE-**

I can see it – Deliberate - Striking, yet natural - Dynamic  
Wordsmithery - Everyday words with a twist  
Powerful verbs - Oh, that was good! - Energetic  
Sensory details – Precise - Specific  
JUST right! – Appealing – Original  
I wish I'd said that - Vivid

Word list of the week  
Tries too hard to impress  
Reaching...just not there yet  
Thesaurus alert

“Good” and “nice” vs. zowie and scrumptious  
“Poetic” language overdone  
Routine language  
Some precision, many generalities  
Leans a bit on clichés  
A good verb or two

Hard to wring much meaning from these words  
Inadequate - Just plain wrong - Redundant  
Imprecise - Vague and stuff... - Passive  
Monotonous – Colorless – Groping - threadbare  
Where are the verbs? – Uninspired - Leans HEAVILY on clichés

1 Not Yet

2 Emerging

3 Developing

4 Maturing

5 Strong

# WORD CHOICE IN CONTEXT

W

ise words in the mouths of fools do oft themselves belie.” I don’t know where I heard that but it has always stuck with me. And no aphorism could be more apt for the trait of Word Choice than that one. Too often kids think that wise-sounding words are the key to good Word Choice, but used foolishly, even the toniest Ivy League lexicon won’t reach your readers or communicate even the simplest ideas. Clarity is the goal; you’ve got to make the reader see it in her head as clearly as you see it in yours.

## The Food War

Simon Wilken was snacking down on a plum with great gusto. He kept a heavy supply of them in his room. Some of the plums he ate weren’t finished; they littered the carpet under his king-size bed. Simon’s favorite fruit and vegetables were part of his everyday life. His parents thought good nutrition was important so they owned a Fruit & Vegetable store and literally stuffed their son until he’d burst.

When Simon went with his family to their cabin, the pantry back at home came to life. Bananas formed a crude ladder to the floor. Grapes tumbled down to form a cushion. The pineapple almost made a dent in the floor as he came down. Quickly as they fell, the oranges and apples scrambled into a cupboard and came out with scissors. The raisins didn’t stay long in that suffocating bag. The brave and gallant colonel mango led the procession into the kitchen while the kiwis defended the rear.

Mushroom scouts peered into binoculars from their perches on top of the refrigerator. They acted the movements of the great fruit horde and calculated where they were going. Half of them fell back and reported to the head tomato. “Sir, the horde is moving southeast at a fast march. I reckon they’re gon’ fer the stairs.”

“Dismissed,” came the reply of the tomato. He ordered the carrot to send a couple of radish messengers to the pineapple and ask him what he was doing. The strong radishes scaled the refrigerator with surprising agility and speed. They wanted to make sure the pineapple saw the white flag. A couple of strawberry guards escorted the radishes to the makeshift tent the pineapple was in.

“Sir,” came the voice of a strawberry, “three radish messengers to see you.” “Send ’em,” the pineapple requested. The radishes were hesitant and stammered but somehow got out their message. “E chief tomato want t’know whurr you’re goin’.”

“Tell him we were going to rescue the casualty plums up in the monster’s room. We hate it when plums are half eaten and thrown about. Either no plum should be eaten or all of a plum should be eaten,” stated the head fruit, “Your master chief tomato can come with us if he wants.”

“Thank’ou kindly, zurr,” came the grateful reply from the radishes. The radishes climbed quite easily up the piece of lettuce that hung down for them.

Soon the whole vegetation mass swarmed the refrigerator to join the fruit horde on their dangerous mission. Greetings were made and as quickly as they met they were off. A dozen onions and peaches rounded the doorway to the stairs. A horrifying shock met them. A huge orange tabby was perched on the stairs snoring loudly. I watched through half closed eyes and kept up the pantomime.

To be continued...

Right from the start, you know this author is interested in words. “Snacking down” is a wonderful verb phrase, and it’s complimented by the equally wonderful adverbial phrase “with great gusto.”

Appropriate and effective shift in vocabulary when characters are speaking.

Very effective use of the passive voice.

Lots of rich vivid description brings this scene to life.

The writer uses vivid verbs, and strong noun-adjective combinations throughout: “stammered” “casualty” “plums” “escorted” “makeshift” “scrambled” “great fruit horde” “vegetation mass” etc.

“Pantomime” is just the right word for just the right effect.

# SIX TRAIT WRITING WARM-UPS

## TRAIT #4: WORD CHOICE

### PREPARATION

### FOLLOW-UP

### EXERCISE

<b>1.</b>	Write "loud" words- i.e. KABOOM! CRASH! ROARING, THUNDERING, EARSPLITTING	Ask students for other "loud" words to add. Have students write down the five "quietest" or softest words they can think of. Have them share these words and list them on the board.	Talk about how words can convey the sound of things.
<b>2.</b>	Write descriptive words for how a pillow feels - i.e. fluffy, puffy, billowy, cushiony, etc.	Ask students for other words to add. Then have them write down 5 words that describe the feeling of mud. Have them share words and list on board.	Talk about how words can convey the feel of things.
<b>3.</b>	Write words that evoke smells-i.e. popcorn, brownies, roses	Have students list other words that describe pleasant smells. Then have them list words that describe unpleasant smells (sour milk, garbage, burned toast, etc.) See how many they can come up with.	Talk about how words can describe specific smells.
<b>4.</b>	Write words that describe tastes - i.e. chocolatey, salty, tangy	Have students add other words that describe pleasant tastes. Then have them list words that describe unpleasant tastes (sour, burnt, hot, etc.)	Talk about how words can describe specific tastes.
<b>5.</b>	Display pictures of two very different scenes - i.e. one city & one country, or one mountain & one seashore.	Have students list other objects they see in the first picture and words that describe them. Then have them list words that describe what's in the other scene. Compare similarities and differences.	Talk about how words can describe what you see.
<b>6.</b>	Write the word "walking"	Ask students to help you make a list of all the ways someone or something could be walking (marching, scuffling, stomping, dawdling, etc.) Now add adjectives (hurriedly, leisurely, angrily, etc.) Compare these verb/adverb combinations with the simple word "walking". Is there a difference in what you "see"?	Talk about how specific words can give you a clearer picture of what's happening.
<b>7.</b>	Display a few pictures with captions (from books or magazines) Display another picture without a caption.	Have students make up descriptive captions for the picture. Share captions. Discuss which make the picture seem more interesting and why.	Talk about how words can affect how you see things.
<b>8.</b>	Have several different kinds of catalogs. (i.e. - J.C. Penney, J. Peterman, L.L. Bean)	Read the descriptions of similar articles. Ask students which they would be more likely to buy.	Talk about the importance of word choice in advertising messages.
<b>9.</b>	Write on the board: "Tired Words"	List a few overused words that "need a rest" i.e. - nice, fun, big, really, etc. Have children suggest alternate words that could be used instead of these. List them next to the tired words.	Point out how much more expressive the new words can be.
<b>10.</b>	Write on the board: "My Favorite Words"	List some of your favorite (expressive) words. Have each student begin their own list. Share words.	Keep lists in writing folders to refer to and add to.

# WORD CHOICE

*Any activity that allows students to practice...*

Building vocabulary through reading anything and everything

Brainstorming: how else could you say it?

Learning to use resources-traditional and computer software

Putting "tired" words to rest

Playing with language, dialects, formal and informal word usage

Building power in verbs

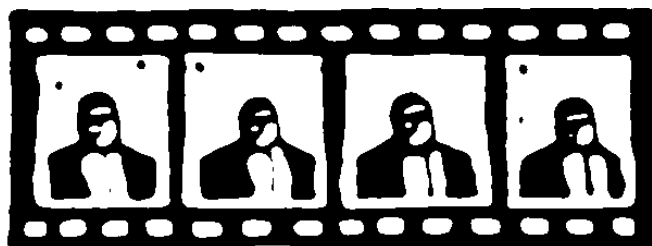
Practicing precision-more for less

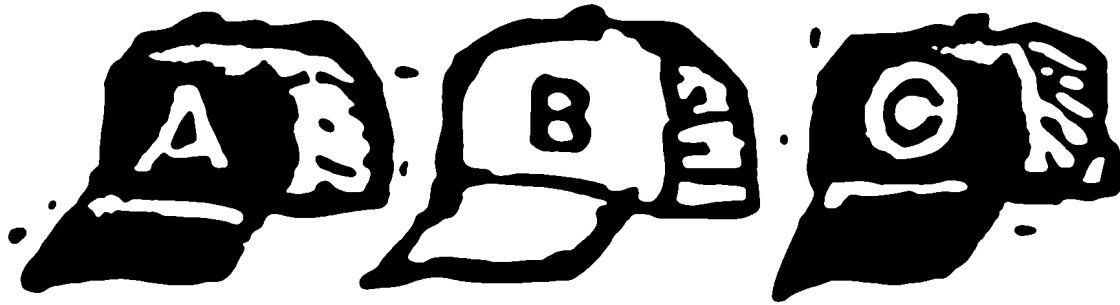
## 1. FORBIDDEN WORDS

Together with students, brainstorm a list of "forbidden" words. Resolve not to use these words in writing or speaking. You may wish to write an obituary, list the words and actually "bury" them in a shoebox or with some other ceremony, banish them from your literary lives. Establish a review committee of students who could grant a special exemption to a student who needs to use one of the forbidden words with a clearly written or presented justification.

## 2. POSTCARDS

Build descriptive powers by brainstorming words to describe postcard places or people-then write the postcard text that make use of those words. See if students can match the resulting descriptions with the right cards. By the way, postcards are available at bookstores in sets on the same subjects, places, or activities. When the postcards all have the same basic theme, the students have to write more carefully in order to describe the different pictures.





### **3. ALPHABET BOOKS**

A favorite for beginning readers, there are lots of possibilities for older readers and writers, too. Share a good alphabet book with students-something from science or history, for instance. Then using your own curriculum, brainstorm a list of topics or ideas that have promise for research projects. Select one or two and encourage students to use the alphabet book as an organizational strategy as well as a way to use key words for big sections of the book. Since there are so many letters in the alphabet, it's a good idea to assign one or two to individuals or small groups and then pull the whole thing together at the end.

### **4. WORD OF THE WEEK**

Begin a list of words that students like. They may sound delicious as they speak them, they may be tricky to read, or they may just be new. Each week, focus on one and devise as many creative ways to practice the word as you can. This can become a great game and students get a chance to practice words they will be using in reading and writing. You can put a student or group of students in charge of this activity and let them pick the word and the different activities to practice for the week-then everyone gets a chance!

# IDEAS AND STRATEGIES

1. **Postcards**-Build descriptive powers by brainstorming words to describe postcard places or people-then write the postcard text that makes use of those words. See if students can match the resulting descriptions with the right cards. By the way, postcards are available at bookstores in sets on the same subjects, places, or activities. When the postcards all have the same basic theme, the students have to write more carefully in order to describe the different pictures.
2. **Word of the Week**-Begin a list of words that students like. They may sound delicious as they speak them, they may be tricky to read, or they may just be new. Each week, focus on one and devise as many creative ways to practice the word as you can. This can become a great game and students get a chance to practice words they will be using in reading and writing. You can put a student or group of students in charge of this activity and let them pick the word and the different activities to practice for a week-then everyone gets a chance!
3. As you share literature, ask students to listen for a favorite word or two. Share with a partner or the whole class. Or write them in a journal (for writer-readers), or you write three or four or more on the board. Guess how to spell as you go for young reader-writers.
4. Determine with the class a list of "tired" words-good, nice, said, etc. Brainstorm alternative words to replace them. Create and laminate "wanted posters" to display worn out words and their alternatives or include as part of a student's writing folder.
5. Collect favorite words. Make lists. Decorate them on colored paper and post them or hang them from the ceilings. Make mobiles. Make word collages. Encourage labeling-but be creative. Put adjectives with the nouns: e.g., not just "wall." But "drab green wall," perhaps.
6. Discuss the different word choice techniques picture book authors use to create pictures in the mind. What words did you hear that helped you see the picture?
7. Write a picture book with blah, ordinary, everyday words-then rewrite it with a colorful illustrative language (compare and contrast).
8. Utilize money values to talk about words and develop lists of those that might be nickel, dime, quarter, and dollar words to use in writing.
9. Brainstorm alternatives. Suppose you are writing a thank you note to a friend. It might begin like this: "I had a good time at your house." Tell your students, "I'm tired of the word 'good.' Help me out. What else could I say? What are some other ways to say this?" Do this often, so that looking for alternatives begins to feel natural.
10. Let students see you using word meaning resources-like a thesaurus. Allow one student to choose a word they would like to hear synonyms for. Look it up and share the synonyms orally.



- ✓ Examples of enhanced word choice to share with your students.
- ✓ The black asphalt was crumbling off at the sides, and the paint on the court was chipping and wearing out, proof that there wasn't a day this court didn't go unused. The hoops were almost opposite. One was older, bent, the backboard slightly cracked, and leaning a hair to the right... ..the sound of your mother's coveted Ray Charles record, scratched and skipping, snaking into every room
- ✓ Then I leapt. I flew straightforward with my arms outstretched, my glove facing up. When I was at the pinnacle of my flight, the ball dropped into the palm of my glove and I dropped like a sack of potatoes on a wet lawn bag.
- ✓ An uninterrupted carpet of snow lay before us.

# USE PICTURE BOOKS TO TEACH THE TRAIT OF:

## WORD CHOICE

- ▶ Make a list of striking phrases or words you find in picture books.
- ▶ Highlight active verbs.
- ▶ Examine the proportion of types of words found in picture books:
  - How many verbs?
  - How many nouns?
  - How many adjectives and adverbs?
- ▶ Discuss the different word choice techniques picture book authors use to create pictures in the mind.
- ▶ Write a picture book using colorless, redundant words. Now rewrite it using colorful, illustrative language. Compare and contrast.
- ▶ Find examples of “everyday” words used well.

# WORD CHOICE

The Amazing Pop-Up Grammar Book  
Amos and Boris  
Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds  
Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions  
Brave Irene  
Caleb and Kate  
Double Trouble in Walla Walla  
The Dreamer  
Earth: The Elements  
Feathers and Fools  
Have You Seen Trees?  
Hiroshima No Pika  
I Love You the Purplest  
Jazz. My music, My People  
The Lotus Seed  
The Magic Fan  
Many Luscious Lollipops  
A Midsummer Night's Dream  
My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch  
The Old Man and His Door  
The Old Woman Who Named Things  
Pictures in the Fire  
Possum Magic  
Shriek!  
Solomon: The Rusty Nail  
Sports Pages  
The Storm  
Storm Boy  
To Hell With Dying  
Voices of the Heart  
Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World's Fastest Woman  
Yo! Yes?

Resource:  
Picture Books  
An Annotated Bibliography  
With Activities For Teaching